Interpreting the Parables

A Practical Guide
Brief History of Interpretation

• “For all their charm and simplicity, the parables have suffered a fate of misinterpretation in the church second only to the Revelation.” Gordon Fee

• The history of interpretation shows that many gravitated to one of two extremes, either over-interpreting or under-interpreting the parables
Augustine's Interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>REFERENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wounded man</td>
<td>Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>Heavenly city from which Adam fell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jericho</td>
<td>Mortality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thieves</td>
<td>Satan and his demons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stripping</td>
<td>Loss of immortality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beating</td>
<td>Enticement to sin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priest and Levite</td>
<td>OT law that was unable to save</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samaritan</td>
<td>Jesus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandaging wounds</td>
<td>Restraint of sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYMBOL</td>
<td>REFERENT</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oil</td>
<td>Comfort that comes from hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine</td>
<td>Encouragement to work fervently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal</td>
<td>Jesus’ human flesh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting victim on animal</td>
<td>Belief in incarnation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two denarii</td>
<td>Great commandments: love God and neighbor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inn</td>
<td>Church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innkeeper</td>
<td>Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise of additional payment</td>
<td>Paul’s celibacy or relinquishment of right to church’s financial support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Adolf Jülicher (Die Gleichnisreden Jesus, 1899)

• Jesus’ parables in their original form were similes with one point of comparison between the kingdom and some object or action
• Allegorical elements were added by the early church in the process of oral transmission of the tradition
• Allegorical features must be stripped away to get back to the original form of the parable
• Principles have been misapplied by evangelical interpreters
Problems with the Simile View

• OT parables were allegorical
• Rabbinic parables were allegorical
• Jesus’ interpretations of his own parables shows that many of them were allegorical
• Interpreters must recognize the distinction between the interpretation of allegory and allegorical interpretation
Tips for Identifying Allegorical Elements

• Since most of Jesus’ parables are part of a continuum between simile and pure allegory, it is important to identify which elements are allegorical and which are not.
• Identify the main characters of the parable
• Identify objects that are given special importance
• Examine the structure of the parable.
• Identify details of the parable that seem shocking, extraordinary, unnatural, or unrealistic.
• Examine connections to introductions or conclusions to the parable.
• Examine connections to other parables in the same grouping.
• Apply steps for Gospel interpretation previously discussed.
• Examine connections to introductory and concluding discussions.
• Examine connections to parables in the same grouping.
• Contrast the wording of the parable in the Gospel with other Synoptic parallels. Additions or changes are often designed to highlight the correct interpretation.
Parable of the Wicked Husbandmen (Matt. 21:33-46)

• Major characters or objects (allegorical)
  – Owner—God (King, Landowner, Farmer, Master)
  – Husbandmen (Wicked)
  – Servants (Righteous)
  – Son (Righteous)

• Objects given special importance (allegorical)
  – Vineyard
  – Fruits

• Examine the structure
• Unrealistic details (probably allegorical)
  – Constant sending of servants
  – sending of son
  – murder of the son

• Introduction and Conclusion
  – Rejection of Christ
    • rebuke of children after triumphal entry (21:14-17)
    • challenge to Jesus’ authority (21:23-27)
  – Judgment of Israel
    • Cleansing of temple (21:12-13)
    • Cursing of fig tree for fruitlessness (21:18-22)
      [notice that issue of offering fruits to vineyard owner surfaces in parable]
• Connections to other parables in grouping
• Principles for Gospel Interpretation
  – Comparative analysis
  – Old Testament allusions
  – Relationship to the major themes of the Gospel